

## Understanding your Reactions

Being told that you, or someone close to you, has cancer can bring up a range of emotions that can be overwhelming.

### Common reactions after diagnosis

It's frightening to hear that you have cancer and it may take time to accept, especially if you don't feel sick. Many people describe being in a state of shock after diagnosis, causing numbness, confusion and fear. Most people experience a range of intense emotions including:

- Shock, fear, confusion
- Stress, worry, anxiety
- Distress, sadness
- Anger, frustration
- Guilt or shame
- Loneliness
- Grief/Loss

These feelings are all common and normal. Many people feel like they're on an emotional rollercoaster. You may find that some emotions come and go, while others last longer.

After the initial shock of diagnosis, most people begin to adjust and find that these feelings reduce over time. However, it is normal for your distress to go up and down when different events occur, e.g., starting or finishing treatment, having follow-up tests, or facing reminders about cancer. People commonly feel anxious at these times. While some people worry they are not reacting in the 'right' way, it can help to accept your reactions as part of the process of adjusting to cancer.

Knowing that some events related to cancer are likely to be particularly stressful can help reassure you that your feelings are normal and help you to plan ways of coping at these times.

### Practical tips that can help after a cancer diagnosis:

**Find a support person.** It can be very difficult to absorb complex medical information when you are feeling distressed. Taking someone with you to appointments can help. Choose someone you can talk to about difficult issues. This may be a partner, family member, or close friend.

**Take Notes.** Take a diary or a notebook to every appointment and record appointments, contact details, and medical information. It's a good idea to write a list of any questions for your doctor or specialist that may arise between appointments.

**Gather information.** Often people feel more in control if they have a greater understanding of their cancer diagnosis, treatment options and what to expect. Some people like a lot of information while others feel overwhelmed by too much detail. It is important to learn at your own pace and to gather information only from trustworthy sources.

**Break it down.** Rather than one stressful event, it can be helpful to think of your cancer experience as a number of different steps that happen over time. While it can be useful to plan ahead, worrying about the future can make you feel even more distressed. Breaking down the journey into stages or steps makes it more manageable.

Instead of thinking of the future as a mountain to climb, it is useful to think of it as a series of stairs that you climb one at a time, often with a breathing space in-between.

If you find that your distress is very high, that it prevents you from functioning, or that you are not feeling any better over time, it is important to tell your doctor or health professional and discuss support options and ways to help you manage.